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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Site logo image | Rochester Beacon posted: " For 400 years, government-sanctioned white supremacy has been perpetuated at the peril and (literal) expense of Black Americans. A reckoning is long overdue. But we only have today, so the time for reparations to begin is now. While apologies and financi" [**Rochester Beacon**](https://rochesterbeacon.com) |  [Reparations. Finally.](https://rochesterbeacon.com/2022/08/01/reparations-finally/)  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  | | --- | --- | |  | **Rochester Beacon**  Aug 1 |   For 400 years, government-sanctioned white supremacy has been perpetuated at the peril and (literal) expense of Black Americans. A reckoning is long overdue. But we only have today, so the time for reparations to begin is now. While apologies and financial compensation in any form do not erase the pain and inequities of generations, they serve as an admission of responsibility and a beginning point for healing.  Howard Beckman  This summer, Rochester has celebrated the Center for Teen Empowerment documentary, “[Clarissa Uprooted: Youth and Elders Uncover the Story of Black Rochester](https://vimeo.com/452282687%20accessed%206/15/2022)” and its accompanying [RIT Art Space exhibit](https://www.clarissauprooted.org/exhibit/). The film and exhibit shine a light on the once-thriving commercial and music neighborhood. Clarissa Street, paralleling other stories from across the nation, is another American example of white supremacy dismantling what a Black community lovingly and painstakingly cobbled together. This time racism took the form of eminent domain that compensated homeowners for the government’s assessment of “fair value,” and urban renewal that falsely promised alternative or even better housing options.  A person smiling for the camera  Description automatically generated with low confidenceEllen M. Leopold  Reparations could be discussed from the Clarissa Street reference point or, tragically, almost any points in our country’s history. However, we obviously need to begin with America’s original sin: capturing and enslaving African people and then their descendants who languished in our fields, toiled our land, and created prosperity for white economies in the south and the north. Once “emancipated,” these “freed” men and women found their fair share of protections and profits would be similarly stolen. After 250 years: no “40 acres and a mule,” not even an apology.  Following limited human rights gains for Black Americans during Reconstruction, there was retaliation when white America rained down plagues of terror: lynching, the KKK, Jim Crow, burning homes and towns, eugenics, and racist policing practices that persist today. While a valid argument is made that not all of white America participated, those who were opposed did not stop, or could not stop, the violence and theft.  As the 20th century marched on, Black soldiers fought in war after war only to return “home” to be denied access to social programs like the [GI Bill](https://www.history.com/news/gi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits), providing education, and jobs. Meanwhile, they again faced violence, and the destruction or seizing of property or assets. Most egregious, as described in Richard Rothstein’s “The Color of Law,” decades of Federal Housing Authority sanctioned redlining and community racial covenants effectively denied these veterans and other Black Americans the accumulation of homeowner wealth. This ongoing racist disenfranchisement occurred at the same time as working-class whites following World War II built their families’ nest eggs through newly minted 5 – 10 percent down payments on low-interest, 30-year mortgages. The white family’s mortgage “piggy bank” was used for emergencies, to send children to college, and finally, to pass wealth from one generation to the next.  My white, working-class parents purchased a 1,259-square-foot home in Newton, Mass., in 1954 for $16,500 and used the mortgage equity to send two sons to college and professional schools. My mother sold that family home in 1979 for $275,000 and bought an annuity that supported her retirement for 38 years. Ellen’s white family came to the U.S. from Canada to Detroit in the early ’50s, and even though they were life-long antiracist activists, benefitted from the privilege of skin color when purchasing their first and subsequent homes—homes that also sent children to college. Juxtapose our family stories with those of Black Americans for whom there was no home ownership in an appreciating community and no   avenue to fund college educations or retirement.  Reparations could be anchored in the policies of the 20th century alone as they have resulted in the massive wealth gap today: Black Americans earn 60 percent of whites but have only 10 percent of the wealth. And wealth begets wealth. Many white suburban families have accumulated resources to advantage their offspring—SAT classes, college consultants, and unpaid internships that fluff college applications. Again, juxtapose those stories with the end of affirmative action by a white supremacy system that rebranded an initiative designed to address racism and disparities as “reverse racism.”  No governmental agency has ever apologized for the harm done to Black Americans, who have been clearly and repeatedly persecuted in state-sanctioned ways—leaving them only the slimmest path to the American Dream.  Recently, California’s Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans produced an [interim report](https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/media/ab3121-reparations-interim-report-2022.pdf) calling for a number of measures, including long-overdue reparations, that would begin to acknowledge our racist history and the role it plays in today’s neighborhoods, schools, policing, higher education institutions, health care, corporations, government and, of course, wealth gap. The final report is due out by July 1, 2023.  The interim report’s recommendations include three that address the racial wealth gap:  ■ Implement a detailed program of reparations for African Americans;  ■ Develop and implement other policies, programs, and measures to close the racial wealth gap in California; and  ■ Provide funding and technical assistance to Black-led and Black community-based land trusts to support wealth building and affordable housing.  The cost of enslavement on the Black community is well documented and requires our attention, not to create guilt in our white community, but to address the greatest of “wrongs,” as well as demonstrate that our country has national credibility. Many white Americans ponder what can—or should—be done in response to past injustices. We suggest the following as a start:  1. The federal and local governments must apologize to the descendants of the enslaved population;  2. Rochester and other communities should begin a truth and reconciliation program to give voice to the harms perpetrated on our Black citizens;  3. The U.S. Senate should pass [S. 40](https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/40), a bill introduced by Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., that would establish a congressional commission for the study of reparations proposals. As Booker [said last year](https://www.booker.senate.gov/news/press/booker-statement-on-house-committee-passage-of-reparations-bill) when a companion bill was sent to the House floor:   “Our nation has not yet fully acknowledged and grappled with the painful legacy of slavery, white supremacy, and systemic racism that tainted this country’s founding and continues to persist in deep racial disparities and inequalities today. It’s important that we right the wrongs of our nation’s most discriminatory policies that halted the upward mobility of African American communities for generations, and we cannot truly move forward without first fully documenting the extent of the harms of the past.”  The cost of racism to our nation and local community could not be clearer than after the racist murders of 10 Black people in neighboring Buffalo. It is the responsibility of our white communities to confront the malignancy of racism and directly and intentionally respond to racist comments, behaviors, and social media posts. It is also our responsibility as white citizens to confront white supremacy wherever and whenever we see it—and that begins with quieting the opposition and openly [advocating reparations](https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/why-we-need-reparations-for-black-americans/). Finally.  Howard Beckman M.D. is professor of clinical medicine at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry. Ellen M. Leopold, MEd, is a social and emotional learning consultant. |  |  | | --- | |  | |  | |